

EARLY MARATHA-SIKH RELATIONS

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The Sikhs in the north and the Marathas in the south have been the torch-bearers of freedom in India. Of the two, the Sikhs were the first to come into the field. The lead was taken by Guru Nanak, the founder of the militant church of Sikhism. The basis of almost all political movements in the world may be traced to religious beginnings. In India religion and politics have seldom been separate — at least up to the beginning of the British empire in this country. Absolute secularism is of foreign import. The *dharma* regulated and guided both the relations of God and man, and of man and man, not only in things spiritual but also in things mundane. When Guru Nanak, towards the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth century, preached the Unity of God and Brotherhood of Man, he also raised his voice of protest against the tyrannies and injustices of the ruling class. He was deeply moved to see the helplessness of the people in the face of the foreign invader. Referring to the invasion of Babar, the Guru said, ' God had sent the Mughal as an angel of death' ¹ on the land of the Lodhis who like 'dogs had wasted away the precious jewel' ² of the country. 'With the bridal procession of sin,' the Guru continued, ' he (Babar) issued forth from Kabul and by force demanded the hand of the bride' ³ of the land. Guru Nanak's heart bled to see the pitiable condition of women-folk of the country during those distressful days. In one of his hymns he says :

' They who wore beautiful tresses and had the partings of their hair dyed with vermilion, have their locks now shorn with scissors, and dust is thrown upon their heads. ... Broken are their strings of pearls. Wealth and beauty have now become their bane. Dishonoured, and with ropes round their necks, they are carried away by soldiers. ... When Babar's rule was proclaimed, no one could eat his food. ... Those who had never thought of (the name of the Hindu god) *Rama* are not now allowed to utter (the name of the Muslim god) *Khuda*. ... They are destined to bewail their miseries.' ⁴

' If a powerful person were to attack another powerful person, there shall be no pain in my mind, but if a ferocious lion falls upon a herd of cattle, the Master should take care of them.' ⁵

But the root cause of the misery of the people, whether at the hands of the local tyrant or the outside aggressor, he felt, was their disunity born of diversity. He, therefore, sought to bring them together both

1. 2. Guru Nanak in *Rag Asa*.

4. Ibid. *Rag Asa*.

3. *Ibid. Rag Tilang*.

5. Guru Nanak, *Rag Asa*.

in thought and deed. But this could only be brought about if they had a common worship and a common social structure of equality and fraternity. He moved about the length and breadth of India, and of most of the then known world. He visited the religious and political centres of the Hindus, Muslims and others, and, on his return to his country, evolved practically a new synthesis of religions, called Sikhism—a discipline of practical, livable life of thought and action. The followers of this new Path were not to be a sect of dreaming renunciators like so many others roaming about the country as mendicants, but a band of servants of humanity with 'their minds turned to God and their hands set to work'—*hath kar wal, dil yar wal*. He laid the foundations of Sikh congregations, called *Sangats*, where they met in the evenings on equal social grounds, sang the hymns of the Guru and drew inspiration for their day-to-day life.

In social life Guru Nanak was a great leveller. He recognised no distinctions of high and low, of the Brahmin and the Sudra, of the rich and the poor, and of the ruler and the ruled. According to him, the rulers were fools and idiots—' *Hukum karrain murakh gawar* ' ⁶—if they had not at heart the good of their people. In fact the 'kings should be dispensers of equity and justice.' ⁷

This was, in a nut-shell, the background of the organisation of Guru Nanak set up for the religious, social and political emancipation of his country from the loathsome priesthood and professional tyranny of the rulers.

A detailed itinerary of Guru Nanak's travels in Maharashtra is not available to history, but the fact remains that he did visit this part of the country. The Sikh temple known as Nanak-Jhera at Bidar⁸ in the south-east of Maharashtra is a living monument of the Guru's visit to the land of the Marathas. There must have been many more places here where Guru Nanak stayed and preached during his travels. This may be safely concluded from the geographical situation of Bidar in the centre of the inverted South Indian triangle, with Sikh temples at Puri⁹ on the eastern coast, Baroach¹⁰ on the north-west of Maharashtra and Pulliamkottai¹¹ to the north of Rameswaram in the extreme south of India. But as his immediate successors remained busy during their short periods of Guruship with more pressing organisational work at home, they could not undertake long journeys far away from the Panjab. The link between the Gurus and the Maratha country could not, therefore, remain intact, and the places consecrated by Guru Nanak's visits soon came to be lost in oblivion.

The relations, however, became closer with the inclusion of the

6. Guru Nanak, *Rag Basant*.

7. Guru Nanak, *Rag Sarang, Var.*

8. Tara Singh, Pandit, *Gur Tirath Sangrah*, Page 16, No. 32.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 15, No. 25.

10. *Ibid.* p. 16, No. 30.

11. *Ibid.* p. 16, No. 31.

hymns of a well-known Marathi saint Namdev in the sacred scripture of the Sikhs compiled by the fifth Guru Arjan in 1604 A. D. The Sikh scripture, called the *Adi Granth*, is unique in several respects. It is the only religious book which embodies the sayings of its prophets in their own words, compiled and edited by one of them. It contains the hymns not only of the Sikh Gurus but of several Hindu and Muslim saints, selected with equal impartiality, regardless of their social status. While two of these saints were Muslims, several of them were the so-called *Sudras* and untouchables. Of them Kabir was a weaver, Ravidas, a *Chamar* (leather-dresser), and Sadhana, a butcher. The Maratha saint, Namdev, was also a *Sudra*, a calico printer and tailor by profession.

Born at Narsi Brahmani in the District of Satara in 1270 A. D., Namdev spent most of his life in his native land at Pandharpur in the Sholapur district. Next to Gyaneshwar, he was a most devout promoter of the Bhakti movement in Maharashtra and 'is famous for his denunciation of idolatry.' Like most of the other Maratha saints, he worshipped God under the name of Vithal, the god of Pandharpur. During his north Indian pilgrimage he visited the present district of Gurdaspur at the age of fifty-five and stayed for some time at Bhatteval and dwelt beside a tank which is still called *Namiana* in his memory. His two Panjabi disciples, Ladha and Jalla, settled down with some of their own followers in the villages of Sukhowal and Dhariwal. Namdev later on moved to another tank in a lonely forest where he hoped to have more leisure for prayer and meditation. But his disciples followed him to that place as well and the village of Ghuman soon sprang up around his hermitage. It was here that the Sikh Sardar Jassa Singh, the head of the Rangarhia *Misal*, raised a fine domed cenotaph in memory of the saint in the eighteenth century. And the famous tank of Ghuman was repaired by Mai Sada Kaur, the mother-in-law of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. After a few years' stay in the Panjab, Namdev returned to Maharashtra and spent the closing years of his life at Pandharpur where he died in 1350 A. D. at the ripe age of eighty. The Panjabi devotees of Namdev have since maintained a regular connection with the Maratha land by an annual pilgrimage to the mausoleum of the great saint. But the best and the most indelible memory of his is enshrined in the hearts of the Sikhs by his hymns, called *abhang* in Marathi, in the *Adi Granth*, which has preserved them not only for the Sikhs and the followers of Namdev but has also helped spread his message far and wide in the world abroad.

In 1606 Guru Arjan, the compiler and editor of the *Adi Granth* and the organiser of the Sikhs into a compact body, fell a victim to the religious fanaticism and political fury of Emperor Jehangir within seven months of his accession to the throne. He was only looking for an opportunity

to put an end to the religious activities of the Guru, wherein he saw a potential danger to the Moghul empire in India. In his Memoirs, *the Tuzk-i-Jehangiri*, he writes :

“In Goindwal, which is situated on the bank of the river Biyah (Beas), there was a Hindu named Arjan, in the garb of a *Pir* and *Shaikh*, so much so that having captivated many simple-hearted Hindus, nay even foolish and stupid Muslims, by his ways and manners, he had noised himself about as a religious and worldly leader. They called him *Guru*, and from all directions fools and fool-worshippers were attracted towards him and expressed full faith in him. For three or four generations they had kept this shop warm. For years the thought had been presenting itself to me that either I should put an end to this false traffic or he should be brought into the fold of Islam.”

The opportunity came to the Emperor when his rebellious son, Khusro, crossed the Beas at Goindwal on his way to Lahore and paid a visit to the Guru whom he had met previously in the company of his grandfather Akbar. Without any enquiry, the Emperor ordered Guru Arjan to be put to death with tortures. He himself says :

“When this came to the ears of my Majesty, and I fully knew his heresies, I ordered that he should be brought into my presence, and having handed over his houses, dwelling places and children to Murtaza Khan and having confiscated his property, I ordered that he should be put to death with tortures.”¹²

This hastened the transformation of the Sikhs into a militant people. So far their movement had devoted itself entirely to religious and social uplift by education and persuasion. But with the martyrdom of Guru Arjan came a stage when they could no longer neglect the development of their physical character. If they were to survive and were not to be squeezed out of existence under the pressure of Mughal imperialism, they must prepare themselves for ‘ a struggle for existence ’, thought Guru Hargobind, the sixth Guru. The Great Moghul had evidently decided to suppress and smother the Sikh movement by ‘ putting an end ’, in his own words, to the activities of the Sikh Gurus. He had ordered the chief of the movement, the Saint and scholar Guru Arjan, to be subjected to *Yasa* and *Siyasat*—torturous death. And the Guru had undergone all this like a true martyr.

The sixth Guru, Hargobind, on his accession to the *gaddi* of Guru-ship relegated the customary rosary to the treasury and wore a sword in his girdle saying, “My *Sēli* (or rosary) shall be a sword-belt.” Arrayed in martial style himself, he ordered his Sikhs to bring offerings of arms and horses instead of money. Soon afterwards he laid the foundations of the *Takt Akal Banga*, commonly called the *Akal Takht*,

12. *Tuzk-i-Jehāngiri*, Nival Kishore, Lucknow, p. 35.

in the precincts of the *Darbar Sahib* (Golden Temple) at Amritsar in the style of a royal balcony. He was fond of wrestling, and of riding and hunting, in addition to the propagation of Sikhism. He thus became a warrior-saint and a saint-warrior. And on one occasion, when his tutor Bhai Buddha, on seeing him in military harness, mildly remonstrated with him, the young Guru replied, "...In the Guru's house religion and worldly enjoyment shall be combined—the cauldron to supply the poor and needy and the scimitar to smite the oppressors."¹³

Encouraged by Guru Hargobind's precept and example, hundreds of adventurous Sikh young men gathered round him and offered to die for their religion. Emperor Jehangir was alarmed to hear of the Guru's preparations and sent him as a state-prisoner to the fort of Gwalior. He was, however, released after some time at the intercession of a Muslim saint, Mian Mir.

Some time after the death of Jehangir, Guru Hargobind found himself in armed conflict with the armies of the Imperial agents in the Panjab with varying results. He was then a full-fledged general, and Mohsin Fani, a contemporary author, who knew the Guru fairly well, tells us in his *Dabistan-i-Mazahib* :

"The Guru had seven hundred horses in his stables and three hundred cavaliers, and sixty artillery-men were always in his service. Of these, a number lived by trade, service and [other] occupations. Every one who absconded from any place sought his protection."

Traditional religionists and *Sadhus* found it difficult to reconcile the two seemingly opposite phases of Guru Hargobind's life. The apparent irreconcilability became the subject of a very interesting talk between Guru Hargobind and the Maratha saint Ramdas when the two met at Srinagar in about 1634.

The following anecdote appears in the thirty-ninth *Sakhi* of the *Panjah Sakhin*—a Punjabi Gurumukhi manuscript in the possession of the writer :—

"Once the Guru was staying in Kashmir. There came a Sadhu to see him. He was a Deccani, Ramdas by name. Riding a horse, the Guru had returned from a hunt. Many Sikhs were there with him. He asked him, 'I had heard you occupied the *gaddi* of Guru Nanak. Guru Nanak was a *tyagi Sadhu*—a saint who had renounced the world. You are wearing arms and keeping an army and horses. You have called yourself *Sacha Padshah*—a True King. What sort of a Sadhu are you?' Guru Hargobind said : 'Internally a hermit, and externally a prince; arms mean protection for the poor and destruction for the tyrant. Baba Nanak had not renounced the world but had renounced *Maya*, the self

13. Macauliffe's *Sikh Religion*, IV-4.

and ego.' Ramdas was pleased (to hear this) and said, 'This has appealed to my mind.' " 14

This Deccani saint was the well-known *Samartha* Ramdas, the religious preceptor of *Chhatrapati* Shivaji. The words of Guru Hargobind touched his inner chords. His spontaneous reaction that 'this has appealed to my mind' is indicative of the sympathetic response of his mind. It seems to have been brought home to him that spiritual life could be reconciled to temporal life without in any way jeopardising the saintliness of the person. He found in the words of the Guru an expression of his own inner spirit. His own people, the Marathas, were not dissimilar in physical set-up and mental attitude to those of the Panjab. Both were children of the Renaissance in India. The infusion of a similar spirit in them would, as well, he seems to have visualised, raise them to their full stature and enable them, in due course, to squeeze out the intolerant Mughal in collaboration with the Sikhs from the north.

Hanumant Swami in his *Shri Samarthanchi Bakhar*, p. 22-23, however, gives a different account of the talk between the two saints. Having been satisfied with the replies of Swami Ramdas, the Sikh Guru, whose name is not mentioned in the *Bakhar*, is said to have asked for *Anugrah* (translated as grace, *Guru-mantra* or initiation). Ramdas told the Guru in reply that he had already been initiated, that there was no difference between the two *Guru-mantras* and that he should worship *Shri Rama*. On the insistence of the Guru, however, Swami Ramdas is said to have given him an ochre-coloured garment and a rosary.

Guru Hargobind's asking for *Anugrah* (if translated as *Guru-mantra*) from Swami Ramdas is improbable at the very face of it. He was himself the head of the Sikh religion with lakhs of followers. As to the ochre-coloured garment and rosary, they can only be taken as tokens of friendship from *Shri* Ramdas. The Guru had relegated the rosary of his own ancestors to the treasury at the time of his accession to the *gaddi*.

On his return to the Deccan, Ramdas 'established a chain of monasteries throughout the land, where physical education was imparted with special attention to the formation of physical strength and character'. He found in Shivaji a promising Maratha Chief imbued with religious spirit and dedicated to the emancipation of his people from Muslim

14. एक बेर गुरु जी कश्मीर में टिके थे। तहाँ इक साधु दीदार को आया। दुखखनी था नाम रामदास। तब गुरु जी शिकार खेलते आवते थे घोड़े पर असवार। साथ सिख संगत बहुत थी। प्रश्न कीता हौं सुगिआ था गुरु नानकी गदी पर बैठा है। नानक गुरु त्यागी साधु थे। तुम शख धारण करे है नि घोड़े फौज रखी है। सच्चा पातशाह कहावता हैं। कैसा साधु हैं। गुरु हरि-गोबिन्द कहिआ बातन फकीरी, ज़ाहूर अमीरी, शख गरीब की रक्खिआ, जरवाने की मक्खिआ। बाबा नानक संसार नहीं त्यागिआ था, माया त्यागी थी। रामदास प्रसन्न होया, कहिआ इह हमारे मन मावती है।

(साखी ३६, पोथी पंजाह साखीआं)

oppression. He admired the zeal of his hero for political power, and, in due course, threw the weight of his own saintly character on his side. The combination of the political power of Shivaji and the spiritual persuasion of Ramdas and some other Maratha *bhaktas* at last resulted in the establishment of Maratha power which played a very prominent part in the freedom of India from the Muslim yoke.

The last of the Gurus in the chain of these relations was the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, who completed the process of Sikh evolution in the *Khalsa* and created a new people of them, not only in their external form but also in their discipline and outlook of life. Born at Patna in Bihar in 1668, he spent most of his life in the Shivalik Hills of the Panjab. He was only a child of seven when his father Guru Tegh Bahadur was executed in 1675 at Delhi under the orders of Emperor Aurangzeb. The Hindu Hill Chiefs made a common cause with the Mughals in the suppression of the Sikhs, and Guru Gobind Singh had to fight as many as fourteen battles in self-defence and for self-preservation. After the death of Aurangzeb, his son and successor Emperor Bahadur Shah, however, entered into friendly relations with the Guru who accompanied him to the Deccan in pursuance of negotiations for peaceful solution of Mughal-Sikh problems. But before these negotiations could come to a successful conclusion, the Guru was fatally stabbed at Nander by a Pathan from the north. He died there on October 7, 1708. But his death has left a historical mark on the land of the Marathas. It has planted a permanent centre of Sikh pilgrimage on the eastern boundary of Maharashtra and has since helped to maintain an everlasting contact between the north and south and between two martial races of the country.

At Nander the Guru had also reclaimed a North-Indian *Sadhu*, Madho Das, domiciled in Maharashtra, from the path of *Vairag* to that of militant Sikhism. During his visit to the Vairagi's hermitage, he clearly perceived what was yet vital in the youthful ascetic, and he relumed it with Promethian fire. Madho Das was formally converted and baptised into a *Khalsa* of the Guru under the new name of Banda Singh and was commissioned to the Panjab to lead the Sikhs in a campaign of liberation. How wonderfully well did he succeed in 1710 in laying the foundation of the first Sikh kingdom, and of fiscal and social reforms of far-reaching consequences, and how smilingly did he and his seven hundred companions lay down their lives in 1716 at the altar of the Sikh faith, has been narrated at some length in the *Life of Banda Singh Bahadur*. With him ends the first part of the Maratha-Sikh relations.

The second part begins with a clash of interests and a race for supremacy in northern India, particularly in the Panjab, the home-land of the Sikhs. The Maratha policy of expansion to the north of Delhi in the eighteenth century seemed to interfere with the freedom of the Sikhs, and this arrayed the two peoples in opposite camps with ultimate success for the sons of the soil. But this must be left to be told on some other occasion.